BRICK BULLETIN

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COVER
Spiritually elevating a corner of Harringay, St Paul's Church

Autumn 1994

PROJECT PROFILE

PARISH CHURCH

SPIRITUAL ELEVATION

St. Paul's Church, Wightman Road, Harringay, London N4

The striking presence of this new church in north London derives from its bold geometric forms. A brick diaphragm wall structure allows simplicity of expression to be maintained both externally and internally.

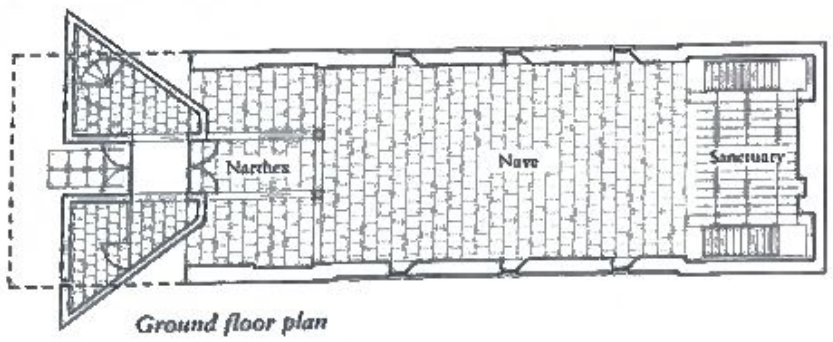
ST PAUL'S CHURCH is a somewhat surprising new church to find in a north London district such as Harringay. Monumental, formal, lofty with clearly defined liturgical characteristics and a high order of artistic refinement, it is the antithesis of the flexibly planned, multi-functional celebratory/social building that typifies many suburban churches built in recent decades.

It was built to replace a Victorian predecessor destroyed by fire in 1984. The original church was much larger than required by the present congregation and the site included a large vicarage and also a modern church hall, which still serves a range of community functions. To help fund the new church, part of the original site was sold for development by a housing association and the original vicarage demolished to allow for the effective development of the remaining part of the site.

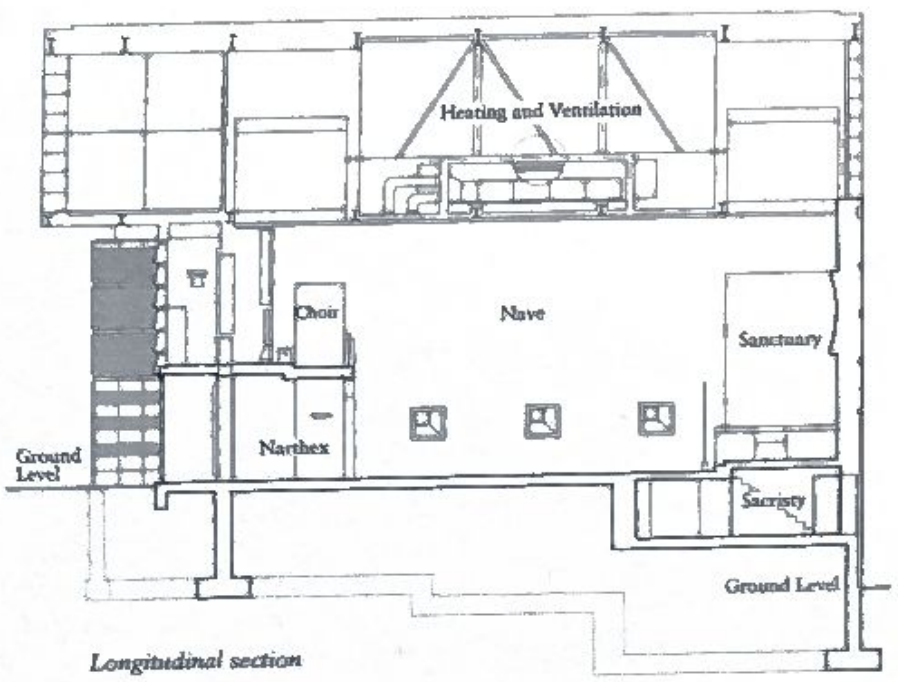
The St Paul's clergy and congregation being High Anglican wished for their new church to be essentially celebratory, with emphasis placed on the sacrifice of the Crucifixion and the resurrection of Christ. The axial, processional planning of the building to meet this requirement led to a long rectangular planform. This is in marked contrast to many modern churches in which congregations are arranged around centrally placed altars to give an emphasis to the participatory nature of the Communion. The loftiness of St Paul's is another striking feature that sets it apart from many contemporary churches and this, too, owes its origin to the liturgical programme.

The new church has a dominant presence on its corner site. It's basic form is of strong, carefully proportioned, simple geometric volumes - a lofty rectangular box roofed with an equilateral triangular volume and fronted by twin triangular towers, which together present a slotted, flat entrance façade to the main road. Entrance doors and fenestration (which is minimal) are black-framed and deeply recessed, a design device that minimises both their scale - giving potential and their visual competition with the simplicity of the broad planes and simple shapes of the walls and roof.

The predominant facing material is red stock brick. Broad bands of reconstructed stone at plinth and eaves



Ground floor plan



Longitudinal section

CLIENT:
The Vicar and Church Wardens of St Paul's Church, Harringay

ARCHITECT:
Peter Inskip & Peter Jenkins : Peter Jenkins

QUANTITY SURVEYOR:
Davis, Langdon and Everest

STRUCTURAL ENGINEER:
Ove Arup & Partners : Michael Courtney

CONTRACTOR:
J J McGinley

Other detailed appraisals of this building have been published in:
Architectura Today:
April 1991,
November 1993
Building Design:
25 May 1990,
3 September 1993
Church Building:
July/August 1994

Far left: The nave is entered through a symbolic portal. The reredos by sculptor Steven Cox dominates the interior.

Left: Sculpture of St Paul in the narthex by Danny Clahane.

Below: View from Wightman Road.

and narrower band courses within the walling give a horizontal emphasis to the general mass. The entrance is marked by wide band courses of reconstructed stone which flank and wrap into the recess containing the door.

The interior

Sir Ninian Comper (1864-1960), himself a great church architect, said that a church should bring you to your knees when you first enter it. The tranquillity and clarity of purpose of the interior of St Paul's has that quality.

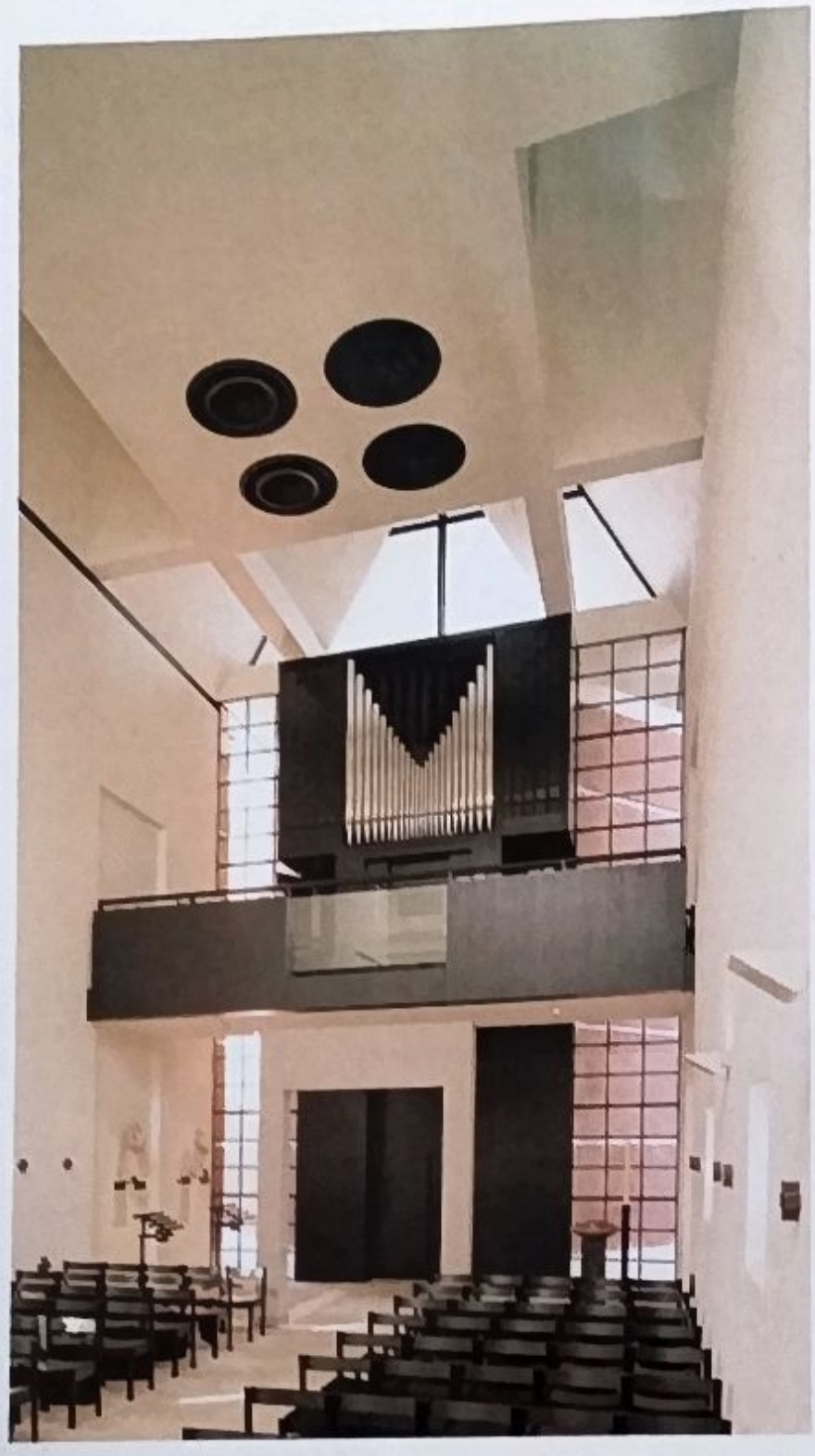
The space is carefully programmed. As is traditional, entry is from the west end into an introductory space, the narthex, below the choir and organ gallery which overlooks the nave. Here the baptismal font is located, symbolically, at the entrance of the nave, the body of the church. Progression into the nave is through a simple, freestanding portal frame. Here 120 seats face the sanctuary at the eastern end. There is no rood screen at the transition to the sanctuary but it is marked by a 300 mm step up in the floor level.

The wall surfaces are plain white-painted brickwork with rectangular recesses to subtly differentiate the three liturgical areas. In the nave the walls are plain with discreet lighting and simple Stations of the Cross as the only fittings. In the narthex and the choir gallery above, tall recessed areas in the wall surfaces mark the different nature of these areas. Behind the altar at the east end a much bolder recessing of the wall surface creates a cross-like form which extends onto the flank walls and defines the area of the sanctuary.

Day-lighting is carefully controlled. It is principally from high level glazing in the triangular ends of the roof structure. Over the sanctuary, a pitched reflective panel directs light downwards. Further daylight is introduced through similar glazing at the west end of the roof and also through narrow vertical windows flanking the entrance. Careful design ensures that the level of day-lighting is graded to be greatest at the sanctuary end. Three small windows in each side of the wall of the nave make minor contributions to day-lighting. These are carefully positioned with asymmetrically splayed reveals so that they are not seen directly from the west end of the church and therefore do not distract attention from the sanctuary.

The visual progression through the church culminates in the reredos, by sculptor Steven Cox who also sculpted the altar of Egyptian Imperial porphyry and the font. The lower part of the reredos depicts a map of the Mediterranean world in which the principal cities visited by St Paul are indicated. Above this rises a Crucifix against a cerulean blue background and this carries the eye on and up to the infinity of the sky beyond, viewed through the principal window in the east gable end. Because the side windows in the nave are above eye-level, only sky can be seen and the symbolism of the sky as infinity is not compromised. The success of this symbolic progression is enhanced by the lofty proportion of the building and the steeply pitched roof.

Due to the slope of the site the sacristy is located below the sanctuary with access to it by a flight of stairs on either side. This arrangement avoids doors or openings interrupting the continuity of enclosure of the nave and sanctuary. Choir room, chair stores, the staircase to gallery and organ are located at the west end of the church in attached triangular twin towers. These are positioned so that splayed walls shield the vertical fenestration at either side of the entrance from glare and



West end from the nave. Heating and ventilation distribution is from the ceiling.

direct views into and out of the church.

The simplicity of form and consistency of its liturgical character gives the interior of this church an atmosphere of great tranquillity very appropriate to reverential worship.

Technical comment

The building's strong and simple form has some interesting technical aspects with regard to the brickwork. The architectural imagery of a simple rectangular box is well expressed by the choice of the brick construction. Plain walls inside and out are subtly modelled or decorated for aesthetic purposes rather than to accommodate structural features.

The structural system is a brickwork diaphragm wall in which the inner and outer leaves (each of 103 mm thickness) are stiffened by 103 mm thick vertical cross ribs at 900 mm horizontal centres. These ribs are bonded into the inner leaf and fixed to the outer leaf with stainless steel shear ties. The external leaf is of clay stock facing bricks and the inner leaf and ribs are of clay commons. The width of the wall overall is generally 553 mm but at the sanctuary end the wall thickness is increased to 1003 mm to allow for the strong modelling of the wall that differentiates this part of the interior from the nave.

Glass wool cavity insulation is fixed to the inner-leaf brickwork within the voids of the diaphragm construction. The shear tie fixings of the outer leaf allow the incorporation of a bituminous emulsion vertical damp-proof membrane at the intersection of the diaphragm ribs and the outer, weathered leaf of brickwork.

At the top of the diaphragm walls a ring beam of reinforced concrete forms the bearing and fixing for the triangular, steel-framed roof truss. Its structural stiffness is used to give stability to the tops of the tall brickwork walls.

To accommodate the 1 in 6 slope of the site the reinforced concrete floor slab is supported on reinforced concrete foundation walls which together form an upside down box structure. Where this is exposed at the lower part of the site it is faced with brickwork to match and be flush with the brickwork of the diaphragm walls above.

The length of the building is such that two vertical movement control joints are required in each of the longitudinal walls. They are positioned at the transition from the narthex to the nave and also from the nave to the sanctuary - there is a slight setback in the alignment of the wall between them, which gives a subtle indication in the outer face of the wall of the location of the special areas within the church.

The brick diaphragm wall has been an eminently suitable and economical form of construction for this building. It has also offered opportunities for subtle or strong modelling as well as for broad, simple planes of walling. These have been exploited in the creation of a bold, well proportioned exterior and the calm beauty of the space within.

Thus brickwork, in a primarily structural form, has made a significant contribution to the refined architecture that gives this new church its exceptional presence. ■